AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Charlotte Hogg for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 7, 1996. Title: Paxton: A Cartography.

Abstract Appr[illegible]

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Chris Anderson

This thesis is a collection of essays about Paxton, a small town in western Nebraska, and an exploration of the contradictions and complexities found there. It is also a reflection on the layers of history and connections that exist not only among families that have lived in these towns for generations, but in the whole town and the surrounding landscape. These layers become intricately intertwined, blurring the distinctions among landscape, people, and their experiences. In making these explorations, I also compare my experience in western Nebraska to that of other authors who have written on the Great Plains, such as Kathleen Norris and Gretel Ehrlich. Chapter I introduces the town and the historical significance it has to my family. Chapter II delves into the complications and connections I eventually discovered while living in Paxton, and Chapter III explores the difficulties of living in a small town. The collection focuses on accepting, even celebrating, the contraries that make up life in Paxton, Nebraska.

Paxton: A Cartography

by

Charlotte Hogg

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Completed May 7, 1996
Commencement June 1996

Master of Arts thesis of Charlotte Hogg presented on May 7, 1996.

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Charlotte Hogg, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee, especially Chris Anderson, Marjorie Sandor, and Jon Olson, for their careful, encouraging feedback and for making me feel like an essayist. A special thank you to Chris Anderson for teaching me so much about the form of the essay and for being approachable and kind from the day I stepped on campus.

I would also like to thank members of the writing groups I was involved in at OSU. I want to especially thank Tricia Franks, Ron "Cyberpunk" Scott, and Sue Vega-Peters for their extensive and thoughtful feedback, and most importantly for bringing a sense of humor to the thesis-writing experience.

Additionally, I would like to thank my grandma for listening to my ideas turn into drafts and for giving me her extensive collection of articles about Paxton. Without her, I would not have seen my topic. And thank you to Rachel Brown for making the map for my thesis, for believing in my topic and my writing, for listening to drafts (sometimes over the phone!), and for always reassuring me that I am being true to our hometown.

Finally, but most importantly, a thank you to my parents, Bob and Carolyn Hogg, who from the moment they read, "When winter comes/bunny knows/winds are cold/and so are snows" were teaching me the value of words. I want to thank

them for their unconditional support, not only in writing and pursuing this degree, but in everything.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandma,

Dorlis Osborn Hogg,

who generously shared her history and

showed me the value of staying put.

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Prologue

When the feeling comes over you, you have
to go home, knowing that home
doesn't exist--not really,
except as you have given meaning to a
place by your own decisions and memories.

--Kathy Moore

I noticed the absence of my mother when I first read through the essays put together for this collection. Logistically, her absence makes sense: the pieces focus on Paxton, Nebraska, my father's hometown. Though my mother has lived in Nebraska for fourteen years, our family's move to Paxton was initially intended as a temporary one; my dad had suffered a job loss, and my brother Jim and I needed to start school the next week. There was nowhere else to go. And though my mother plans on eventually retiring in Nebraska, she does not think of it as her home. Home to her is Illinois and Ohio, where she lived until her mid-twenties.

But her near-invisibility in the following essays is misleading, because she is the doorway by which I entered my thesis.

Each year for the past six, usually right after coming back from Paxton for the holidays, Mom has come into my room, out of earshot of Dad, and said, "*This* summer we're going to make that trip to Ohio. Just you and me. We can go to my mom's grave, visit Al, and find Aunt Clara." Her mother

Myrtle died before I was born, found dead on the kitchen floor with a wooden spoon in her hand. Myrtle had four siblings, but in all the years we've planned on going to Ohio, they have died, one by one, even Aunt Clara, leaving no Gotsche's left to ask our questions of. Even so, I agree, telling her yes, we should finally do it. And for about half an hour, we talk about how inexpensive it would be if we stayed with her college friends and how we could make good time with two drivers. But I know we won't be going this summer, and probably not the next, because of money, jobs, or graduate school. "We will get there," she insists anyway. For a long time, I wasn't really sure why she wanted to go; too many of her childhood memories are stories of her alcoholic parents.

When I read Joan Didion's "On Going Home," I felt like the curtain of my mother's comment was finally being lifted, and I could see what was behind. Didion spends a large portion of the essay wandering with melancholy in a visit to her home: "We miss each other's points, have another drink and regard the fire" (322). Though the specifics are different, I thought of my mother when Didion talks about crying after calling home and about "literary baggage with which we left home in the fifties" (323). As a child of two alcoholics, my mother experienced the same silence Didion describes. Yet Didion's melancholy moves into a surprisingly strong sense of place that she is afraid her child will not receive: "I would like to give her more. I would like to

promise her that she will grow up with a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her great grandmother's teacups" (324). And I began to think of my mom not seeing her brother in ten years and both of her parents being dead, leaving her with no childhood house. When she was 25, looking at me in my crib as Joan Didion looked at her daughter, did she ever imagine that her daughter would not absorb the history of her home? Does she sit in Lincoln, Nebraska, wishing she could take me to her childhood room in Cleveland, Ohio, shaking her head at how far I am from the world she knew when she was 25? Is this what spurs the yearly plans for a trip to Ohio? Does it bother her that Paxton, the place I consider *my* home, contains no elements of her home?

It makes me wonder how my mom resigned herself to an absence of place but still says to me, "I just don't see you settling out in Oregon." I know from the way she cries when she sings "Silent Night" in German that she carries some sense of home within her. Or I'll be with her at a garage sale and she will buy a coffeepot with a plastic handle made only in the Chicago factory where her father worked, even though she already has four of them.

I grew up watching Mom fill her need for home and place with small moments like these. She has helped me realize that home is just as much intangible as it is tangible, that home means place in time as much as it means an address on the mailbox. And as she reads these essays on Paxton, I hope she understands that though the history I researched is not

about the place where she came from, the collecting of sensations and moments is a trait I have learned from watching her.

I. BEARINGS

Paxton

Mountains dwarf the imagination.

--Oscar Wilde

Last Monday when I asked my writing class for responses to Kathleen Norris's essay "The Beautiful Places," a student of mine said, "It seemed like a big commercial for South Dakota." His response jarred me. I had been so drawn to Norris's book about a small town in the Great Plains. Of course, if he continued reading *Dakota,* my student would find that though Norris defends a place most people fly over rather than even drive through anymore, much of her attention is paid to the difficulties of Plains life that townspeople sometimes only make worse, from resisting change to idealizing isolation.

And she's right when she shares the contradictions that exist in the Dakotas "between hospitality and insularity, change and inertia, stability and instability, possibility and limitation, between hope and despair, between open hearts and closed minds" (7). In defense of her place, she points out "that these are the ordinary contradictions of human life, and that they are so visible in Dakota because we are so few people living in a stark landscape" (7). I experienced the same oppositions daily for six years while living in Paxton, population 563, located in the Platte

Valley of western Nebraska.

What I want to do in this collection is explore these contradictions, but avoid sketching a bleak picture of a Paxton that in thirty years will have suffered from dehydration both in the earth and minds. This approach toward small towns seemed all too common while I conducted research ("It's one of several empty buildings on Main. Paradise wasn't sufficient after all, and the attitude and the belief that it ever was is part of the reason it's gone" [Norris 47]). It is too easy, in the naked starkness of the plains Norris mentions, to analyze the benefits and difficulties of small-town life in some sort of clinical way, a way that might hover in generalizations like a cloud, neglecting individuals. I would instead like to approach this collection with an ideology inherited from composition theorist Peter Elbow's "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process." Elbow discusses the difficulty teachers face by being committed to ideas that seem to oppose, an obligation to students (encouraging expression and creativity) and an obligation to knowledge and society (evaluating and criticizing). He argues that rather than settling for being either a "hard" or "soft" teacher, it is possible--and advantageous--to be both teacher and evaluator (65). In the following pages, I embrace the contraries illuminated by Norris, contraries that are small-town life in the plains.

When I discovered how many essayists had written about

the Great Plains, I approached their books with the same expectation I have meeting a distant relative--a stranger who already knows the family secrets. So I was surprised when I found myself resisting authors like Norris, Gretel Ehrlich (*The Solace of Open Spaces)* and Ian Frazier (*The Great Plains)*--not because what they were saying was inaccurate, but because they seemed to *examine* a life on the Great Plains instead of *live* one. The commonality among these particular writers is the fact that they came to the plains from places like New York and California. Ehrlich explains, "I came [to Wyoming] four years ago. I had not planned to stay, but I couldn't make myself leave" (3). Neither did Norris expect to stay; "We expected to be in Dakota for just a few years" (4). And Frazier, after dreaming of Montana, moved there from New York and found himself so intrigued by the Great Plains that he travelled from Texas to North Dakota: "They're so big that you could never know all there is to know about them" (12). Though all of these authors sensitively acknowledge and describe a richness in the plains that most outsiders overlook, it is clear they were not initially expecting a positive reaction.

What surprises me is their surprise.

I understand, of course, that they were unable to leave; yet I am uneasy with the "back to the heart of America" connotation that comes with New Yorkers "finding themselves" on the prairie. With the exception of Norris, whose family had a history in Lemmon, South Dakota, the notion of writers

heading for the plains suggests hints of the Western quest myth. None of them grew up there.

This articulates, I think, my resistance to authors moving in from the coast and finding beauty on the plains, as though we were a discovery to be made. I did not have to wait for the plains to "grow on me." I never had to look for beauty on the plains. It was a given.

Because the landscape is not just around me but also within me, my emphasis has not been the dancing of the South Platte River or the subtle crescendo of land that becomes the sandhills. It has been the people who, like me, grew up with that landscape as their background. And by background I don't mean an unobtrusive or insignificant backdrop, but what the dictionary calls "the social, historical, technical, or other circumstances whose understanding gives meaning to a fact, event, etc."

Scott Russell Sanders, in his essay "Settling Down," writes about the spiritual and ecological reasons for staying in one place. His argument includes examples of investing in the land, such as the Miller family, who rebuilt three times on the same site after their home was beaten by tornadoes. I believe his spiritual and ecological reasons are valid, but biographical reasons for staying put are just as valuable. Life among this landscape is as crucial an investment as the landscape itself. The Perlingers, McFaddens, and Browns, in my mind, are not connected to the landscape; they are the landscape. The surroundings are textured with faces that

have been there before me; when I drive on Sarben Road out north, it is impossible to forget I am the fourth generation of Hoggs to see the prairie grass and shooting star flowers.

At Grandma's house last winter, I told her I wanted to write about Paxton. Unlike nearly everyone else I told, she didn't ask, "How are you going to write a book about this place?" She understood. Grandma has written memoirs of living there, knows the feeling of needing to share this place folded into the sandhills and built between the North and South Platte Rivers that converge into the Platte just east of town. She has known for years what I was just coming to learn, something best articulated by Gretel Ehrlich in "A Solace of Open Spaces":

> A person's life is not a series of dramatic events for which he or she is applauded or exiled but a slow accumulation of days, seasons, years, fleshed out by the generational weight of one's family and anchored by a sense of place. (5)

What Grandma hadn't known until I began reading drafts aloud, sitting beside her on her beige love seat, is that Paxton is as much my touchstone as it is hers.

Grandma's House

My Grandma's name is Dorlis--not Doris, but Dorlis--with an L. The rumor is that her name was supposed to be Dolores but was misspelled on her birth certificate. Since being born in 1909 to Ed Osborn and Mary Lillie Lake, she has never lived anywhere besides Paxton, Nebraska, population 563. At age eighteen, she married George Paxton Hogg, nine years her senior, and though he died in 1980 from a stroke, she is still living in the white house he built. She had two children nearly twelve years apart, my Aunt Yvonne and my dad. Yvonne has also lived in Paxton in another white house, two doors down from Grandma, for the past thirty years.

When I stay at Grandma's house, I usually sleep in the basement bedroom rather than my dad's old room or the master bedroom (though she always offers it to me). The basement, made up of a laundry room, spare room, bedroom, and bomb shelter (a tiny closet filled with canned goods), used to be the entire house. The bedroom contains a toilet with a curtain around it, a double bed, and a dresser. Because of the framed photos along the wall, it feels more like a museum than a bedroom. Most are 5 by 7 black and white pictures of couples without smiles. If not for the labels in the corner, I would not know who anyone was, except for the large round

frame of Jessee Osborn, Ed's father, who fought in the Civil War. Jessee moved to Paxton in 1889, and Grandma prides herself on staying where he arrived a century ago from Wisconsin, "sight unseen" (D. Hogg 1).

My parents tried, at least once a year, to visit Paxton, usually in the summer. When I went to the store with Grandma, old ladies would approach and say, "Well, Dorlis, who's this? It can't be Harvey's daughter." In her church, sharing the peace took at least five minutes as they wandered around the pews talking about harvest or the football game, no one just turning slightly to shake a hand like we did at home. It seemed everyone but my dad had lived here forever. I figured, or maybe hoped, that their lives were dull; then my family's disjointedness didn't seem so bad.

Minneapolis to Fargo

From the first move, there is only one memory. I am five, playing the Monkees Greatest Hits *album in the living room of the Rhode Island house (Mom refers to it by street name). I see the orange album cover leaning against the stand of the green record player. Dad commutes every weekend from Fargo, where he works at Monarch photo, already living in our new town and waiting for his family. It must be Sunday afternoon; he comes in to say goodbye for another week. Jim has locked himself in his room, and I don't know where Mom is. I'm dancing in circles by the record player to "Shades of Gray" when Dad kneels in front of me. I stop*

dancing to hug him. He starts to cry, and I tell him not to, because we will all be together soon.

My mom tells me later that day--labeling boxes "Bob-trains" and "Kitch.-Fragile" with permanent marker--that I'm the strongest one in the family.

Fargo to Watertown, South Dakota

For the next move, six years later, I am not so brave. Again, Dad has been commuting back and forth. I don't care about only seeing him on weekends; I don't want to leave my best friend Staci from the red house on the corner. We promise to send tapes to each other every week, and she gives me a jumbo Garfield card while we say goodbye in front of the moving truck. I hate my parents for this upheaval and only speak to Cinder, our black cat, during our car ride south to Watertown.

I spend the summer with my brother, playing 45s and talking into the tape recorder to Staci. We are renting an old gray house, and Mom thinks the man living in the basement smokes marijuana because funny smells come from the vent, and he plays that Tom Petty and Stevie Nicks song too loud on weekends.

Two weeks before sixth grade starts, Mom takes us to school to register. The building is three stories high, not new like Longfellow Elementary in Fargo. As we walk down the stairs in the old, musty building with the principal, I can't envision myself walking up those stairs everyday.

Watertown to Paxton, Nebraska

One week before sixth grade starts, Dad loses his job at Arrowhead. There is no time to plan; we pack everything and drive ten hours to Paxton, Nebraska. Dad's mom and sister are there; we can enroll in school temporarily until we decide where to move.

On the way to Grandma's, Mom tells me how lucky it is that we'll be so close to relatives, but her eyes say I hate Nebraska. *Looking out the window is oddly comforting. It's not pretty: the grass is browning and prickly; we see more cows than horses, and the hills seem stumpy. Yet I keep looking. Maybe I am already feeling the pull of history from the landscape, or maybe I am trying not to look forward, where all I can see is the yellow truck with "Ryder" in bold, black letters. My dad is driving it, and it holds everything.*

Paxton to Sidney

During my first semester of college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where Pound Hall houses as many people as the entire town I've come from, I get a phone call. They are moving again.

"This one shouldn't be rough. Paxton isn't really your home anymore," Mom says. She's right, I tell myself in my confining dorm room on the sixth floor. And I can't understand why this move, one I'm only indirectly involved in, aches the most.

I ride four hours to help them move out of the house we rented for six years because we were only going to stay a few months. At Hehnke's Grocery Store, four people tell me I always have a place to stay when I come home.

Lincoln to Corvallis, Oregon

Again I am watching the back of a truck, only this time a small Nissan pickup. And again, Dad is driving, and this time only my own possessions are in front of me, mostly (but not entirely) covered by plastic blue tarp. After spending the night in Paxton, we leave from Grandma's early in the morning. She leans in the window to see that I'll be able to reach the foil-wrapped cinnamon rolls from the driver's seat. I see Aunt Yvonne standing behind, tugging at her short hair, annoyed with her mother. But I know better. Grandma is stalling for time, just like I want to.

My parents and I travel to Oregon as a caravan of Nissans. We will be going through large, squarish states, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Oregon. As we approach the Nebraska-Wyoming border, I feel a gnawing. By taking I-80, we will miss the best parts of western Nebraska: Lake McConaughy, Chimney Rock, Scott's Bluff. In Wamsutta, Wyoming, my fan belt breaks, and I feel like I'm breaking with it. The mechanic, who looks about sixteen, says he will repair my car after eating lunch and that he'll charge seventy dollars labor. In my frustration, I steal a shot glass from the station's tourist paraphernalia. Sitting beside me on the

cement step at the Sinclair station, Dad laughs as I give him the dusty shot glass. While he laughs I cry, and though he doesn't soothe me with words, he brings me a candy bar and pop. He knows how it feels to trek life possessions across state lines, and he knows how it feels to leave Paxton.

Grandma's upstairs is filled with furniture Grandad made: two tables with gunstocks for legs, a china cabinet (used for scrapbooks), a desk, and a nightstand. All are made with stained oak, the same wood Grandad made my jewelry box from. Upstairs, in the foyer, there are more pictures, and aside from a frowning Jessee Osborn (a replica of the photo downstairs), these pictures of Grandma's children and grandchildren are in color, and the mouths are smiling. My parent's wedding picture is faded from facing the window, making Mom's nose barely visible and giving her dress a yellow tint. Grandma also hung the golden family tree we gave them for their fiftieth wedding anniversary next to the portrait of her and Grandad. Until I remind myself Grandma is only 4'11", it's a deceiving picture--Grandad, only 5'8", towers over his wife. Though always in my mind's eye, I look closely at the walls each time I go there.

Even though Mom furiously decorated each house we lived in, covering the walls in an attempt to mask the unfamiliarity of a new place, our houses never quite felt like Grandma's. When I walked into her house smelling cinnamon and lily-of-the-valley, I *knew* pictures and

furniture and the kitchen table would look the same as they had for my last visit. What I didn't know until recently is how long I have been wrestling the comforts of Grandma's house, wanting so much to chastise her for never venturing out of Paxton, yet also wanting to know the feeling of being grounded. Sometimes when I awaken from a nap in her bedroom or make a sandwich in her kitchen, I have a moment of stillness, and I imagine this is what Grandma's life must feel like.

In his essay "Settling Down," Scott Russell Sanders asks, "But if you stick in one place, won't you become a stick-in-the-mud? If you stay put, won't you be narrow, backward, dull?" (331). For a long time I wondered about these things as a teenager living in western Nebraska surrounded by people who had never left the state and probably never will. I was always praised for my "resilience" and "independence" because I made changing addresses look as easy as erasing a chalkboard. I would sit with Grandma at her kitchen table playing Scrabble and see only stagnancy from the woman who trekked all over town serving on the Paxton Library Board, Methodist Women's Club, Keith County Historical Society, and who chartered the Paxton Garden Club. How could I only have seen immobility from a woman who never sat still? But I was thinking in terms of spreading out instead of going deeper. That was all I knew.

I actually only lived in Paxton for six years and spent

most of the time wishing I were someplace else, a place people had heard of. I am not surprised that living in Paxton changed my view of the town; what's surprising is how I realized, much later, that it changed my view of everything. Only now am I beginning to understand how vital the histories and connections of the town are for someone like me, someone who has moved and moved and moved again. Throughout all the moves were visits to my grandma; her house meant movement, too, but not the kind where grass blurs by on the roadside. It is a more deliberate, careful movement weighted with knowledge of what came before in this place.

II. COORDINATES

Paxton Public Library

When I look through family clippings Grandma has collected, there are dozens of photos of her. Next to each article are her cursive strokes: *Keith County News* and the date. Grandma at the flower show, holding her Horticulture Sweepstakes Award ribbon. Grandma as a finalist in the Centennial Queen Pageant. Grandma and Grandad when they were Grand Marshals in the Paxton Labor Day Parade. Most pictures, though, show Grandma at the Paxton Public Library, where she served on the board for sixty years. There are varied poses of her standing in front of the adult fiction section with Fae or Betty, posing with the newest officers of the library board, or sitting at the desk. In every picture her thin lips make a tight smile that belies her generosity.

I was in the sixth grade when we moved to Paxton, and at first the smell of old books meant only old books, nothing more. But the limitations of the tiny library compared to the bright, brick Fargo Public Library soon became insignificant, because Grandma had a key to this library. As though I was its owner, I could go to the library whenever I wanted, not just during the hours when they were open (Saturday morning 9-11, Monday 1-4, Thursday 6-9). The first

year she would go with me, and we would walk through the alley behind her house, then south down Main Street for two blocks. The "downtown" section is contained in these two blocks, and the library is on the block between Highway 30 and the railroad tracks, right across from the Post Office and Ole's Big Game Lounge. Though this is a three minute trip, it took us half an hour, since we also had to pass Hehnke's Grocery Store, the bank, and Swede's Cafe. And each place had its own smell that drifted into the next as we walked, from the warm smoke of Ole's to the perm smell of Roz's beauty shop.

Inevitably we were stopped by someone needing to ask Grandma a question, like Mary Meredith or Shirley Kugler from the Garden Club. Next we would have to stop for the mail, where Francis would remind Grandma to copy her fruit cocktail cookie recipe (not one of my favorites) for the United Methodist Women's Club.

I would stand clutching shiny books, annoyed that Grandma was so needed by the whole town while I needed her to let me into the library. Finally, we would go across the street and into the white building, which at 30' by 30' is smaller than some living rooms. The library looked the same that day as it has every day since. To the right of the door are magazine racks, to the left, the librarian's desk. To the left of that is the children's section, its own little square area of books, but not quite separate, since volunteer librarians like my grandma watch from the desk. Moving in

closer, the librarian finds a book and eventually ends up reading to Nathan or Megan while their mom goes across the street to get the mail.

Adult fiction, with one section for nonfiction and Nebraska history, make up the rest of the selection. A table sits in the middle of the room which needs to be moved during Story Hour so kids have room to make a circle. There's no need for a card catalogue or Dewey decimal system--posterboard with stenciled letters separates the F authors from the G--and instead of volunteers issuing library cards, two recipe card boxes sit on the desk filled with index cards. Under the H's: Bob Hogg, Carolyn Hogg, Charlotte Hogg, Dorlis Hogg, and Minnie Holmstedt. On my card, every book I've read in the library is listed. The slip from each book stays in the other recipe card box until the book is returned (no drop box). Names and dates are carefully written in--that way, anyone could see who has checked the book out beforehand. Next to the back door is the storage closet (with brown drapes for a door) which holds scrapbooks of official town photos, high school annuals, and historical documents. There is a bathroom, but only since 1985 has there been a phone.

My favorite part of the library has always been the large three ring leather-bound notebook, *Paxton Histories.* Carl, who let me interview him when I wrote my junior term paper on the Dust Bowl, crafted the cover before he died. My grandma's story is in there (the longest at 44 pages); so is

her next-door neighbor Elsie's, along with the stories of twenty other women whom I knew from church or through Grandma. After finding two new books, I would sit at the table with *Paxton Histories* in front of me while Grandma organized the new releases and selected one to check out for herself. I learned that Grandma's mother owned a "huge, dark Majestic range," and that Elsie moved to Paxton in the sixth grade, played basketball in high school in 1920, and didn't marry Fritz until she was 29 years old (D. Hogg 15).

Fritz contributed to the library, too, by constructing a miniature library on a trailer bed for the Labor Day Parade. Little kids would sit inside the replica and peek out to wave while the float glided down Second Street. Grandma, who served as president of the library board numerous times, was often on the float, too. She always managed to catch my eye and return the wave I gave her.

The next year, in junior high, I kept going to the library during "closed" hours, but instead of going with Grandma, I started going with my friend Rachel, whose mom was also on the library board. We sat at the table and talked about important things, like Alan Wilson getting a new puppy named Brewster (I'd liked Alan for weeks). Rarely did we even check the shelves for books to take home. We sat on the cold floor of the tiny storage room, looking through old Paxton annuals for pictures of our friend's parents or the bank president's fifth grade photo. During summers we

volunteered to help with Story Hour on Friday mornings, sitting in a circle with three and four year olds while Rachel's mom Betty read to us. Even a breeze through the open door couldn't circulate the musty smell of books; it hung on us like a parka.

In high school and college, I borrowed the key from Grandma, and Rachel and I bought food at Ole's, then carried our chicken strips and mashed potatoes across the street to eat inside the library. With the lamplight, AM radio, and the smell of brown gravy, I felt more like I was in my living room than a public library. We used the typewriter, looked to see what books Mark Perlinger checked out (the only handsome bachelor in town), and ate lemon bars leftover from the library board meeting that afternoon. Sometimes we just looked at front cover slips to see who had read what books, ceaselessly curious about people we saw every day--the same people we complained were so boring. Other times we looked for steamy scenes alerted to us by Rosa Reitz, who had written "MUDDY" on the inside flap of each "dirty" book to warn readers who may be offended. We never felt we were being intrusive; the library was ours. The history of the town was in that room, as tangible as the pages around us.

In 1992, the library celebrated 60 years of service: for serving the longest time on the library board, Grandma was interviewed about its history; the interview article was next to a picture of her in paisley, coyly looking over her

shoulder at the camera while sitting at the desk. The library first opened with donations from Paxton residents when high school English students went door to door and collected nearly 500 books. Until 1949, when Hugo Hehnke (the grocery store owner) finally suggested government funding, the library board held ice cream socials, charged a dollar for a library card, and fined a penny a day for overdue books. The folded clipping mentions only women library board members who "were found to be very handy with hammer and saw, while others lent their steady hands in holding boards and nails in place" (*Keith County News,* 10). These are the same women who today, if they have not died, donate scrapbooks--filled with articles on everything from weekend visitors to obituaries--in hopes of contributing directly to the town's history, as if they haven't already.

It still surprises me when something in Paxton has changed while I've been away, as though the town is in some way immune to progress, not because I think it isn't capable of growth, but because I don't want it to change when I'm not there to witness it. I carry the town with me like a roll of film that's just been developed and don't like it when the vision in my mind's eye is altered, reminding me of the infrequency of my visits. Of course, before driving into town I'm always informed of any changes from Grandma or Aunt Yvonne but am still jarred when I see something for the first time, like the Keno board in Ole's or the new Days Inn being

built at the Paxton I-80 interchange.

Last August, when visiting Grandma, I wanted to look again at the *Paxton Histories* book I had read so many times before. For weeks I had envisioned spending an entire day at the library leisurely leafing through the histories and scrapbooks. As I asked Grandma for the key, I told her I wanted to make copies of local writings to take back to Oregon with me. She had retired from her sixty years of volunteer work on the Library Board, but I figured the least they would do was let her keep the key. They didn't.

"All I know is Carol has a key. And Betty Brown, because she's president," she told me without anger. Apparently I was much more bothered by this than she was. Carol, I discovered, is the first paid employee of the library; this was news I hadn't yet heard. She has a Master's degree in library science, works seven hours a week, and earns minimum wage.

That was on Thursday. I waited impatiently until the library opened Saturday morning and went to the library, ready to sit with the big leather book for a while before I made copies. I had to explain to Carol who I was, why I needed to take the book and drive twenty miles to a copier in Ogallala. Carol, whose colorless lips blended into the rest of her face, peered at me through her glasses and said, "I can't let you take this book. It's the only copy we have."

"I understand. But I'm Dorlis's granddaughter. Dorlis Hogg." A blank look from Carol.

"I'm sorry. I wish we had a copier." Carol smiled without opening her mouth, then returned to reading index cards.

I had never dealt with red tape in Paxton and never thought I would have to. Despite my anger at not being given special treatment (which I deserved, considering who my grandma was), I carried the heavy book to the table, hugging it perhaps a bit more tightly than usual, and just started to read. The more uncomfortable I became sitting at the table with Carol in the room, the more I began to realize something I had never detected about these stories I knew so well: they were not written for outsiders. I hadn't noticed, of course, because I have always been an insider, until that day, when Carol was leaving at eleven, and I had only two hours to spend in the library. My eyes easily glided over Lucille's opening line that would absolutely confuse a newcomer; "I was born about one mile straight north of Paxton, Nebraska, in the first house on the east side of the road, where the Bruce Snyder family now lives" (Sedlacek 1).

Even the town history carefully compiled by Fae Christensen fails to remain an objective account: "Ah, but the major thing [in our history] has to be the relationships that are established in the small town. Bonds of steel that can only deepen and intensify as the years pass" (8). It's possible a stranger would find little use for passages written two years ago that contain clichés or offensive language by today's standards ("This vicinity has been

inhabited for several thousand years by the Redman. There have been transient white people in the section for at least three hundred years" [Christensen 2]).

There is an intimacy within these writings more profound than "small-town bonding." When I read parts of *Paxton Histories,* I remember my mom typing Grandma's manuscript in Fargo in 1982, not sure if Grandma spelled "teats" right. Or I remember Elsie's round face smiling at her own caustic humor as she spoke to my dad in her backyard. Fae, though never my teacher, came to my house and hugged me the day I placed third in the regional spelling bee. The ownership I feel toward this large book--and to the library itself--must come from these moments.

The day after my episode with Carol, I coaxed Betty Brown into letting me sneak into the library, take the book, drive to the Catholic church in Sutherland (10 miles away) to make copies, and return home again, book unscathed. I asked her if she minded me staying at the library for a while; I'd lock the door when I left. Of course, Betty didn't mind. And inside, I moved through the room touching things, flicking my finger along the two shelves of new releases, stamping the due date onto my hand, sifting through worn album covers. I spent a few minutes leafing through index cards at the green aluminum desk before I walked to the young adult shelves--shelves made with the "steady hands" of the women who founded the library--and found a Hardy Boys book

from the 1940s. On the inside flap I found my dad's signature, slightly faded but still unmistakable.

Main Street

Paxton holds a street auction every year in the middle of March, always on a Saturday. For six years I had only to walk through my back alley to Main Street to view the display of items being auctioned off. For the first couple of years I saw the auction simply as a place where people stood around in windbreakers bearing the names of seed companies as they talked to each other while blowing into hot coffee from Swede's Cafe; it seemed small-town and hokey.

Maybe it was because I was feeling nomadic that I decided to spend the day roaming the street auction the last year I lived there. In a few months I'd be leaving for college in Lincoln, and my parents would be moving away from Paxton at the same time. I wanted to spend the day walking up and down Main Street, the most familiar road I knew.

The March wind had no strains of spring to it, so I put on Grandad's old denim jacket Grandma had found in the garage after he died. My parents, Grandma, and Aunt Yvonne were already downtown rifling through the goods. George Hartman was standing in the alley at the edge of my driveway with a cup of coffee, talking to my mom, his hair looking like Jerry Lewis'.

"There's my girl!" He hugged me with the arm that wasn't holding the coffee.

"Hey, George." Some days it seemed like I was everybody's girl.

I turned right at the edge of my alley. The crowd was just in front of Hehnke's Grocery Store, faithfully following Dean's Chevy truck as it inched along the street all day, elevating Dean above the crowd. Dean was the auctioneer, or as the sign by the railroad tracks boasted, "World's Best Auctioneer--1981!" Years ago, he had constructed a working office onto the bed of his pickup, like a little trailer. The pickup was brown and his "office" white, with the Schow Auctioneering logo painted in red on each side. Every year he looked the same as he leaned over, wearing a light gray Stetson and a brown sport coat with elbow patches. His face was usually puffy, and everyone knew he had at least two DWIs under his World Famous Auctioneer belt buckle. Although I couldn't see his legs, I was sure he was wearing dark denim Wranglers and brown ropers. He was already in action. The first few years of the street auction, I would get bored because I couldn't understand him--it sounded like he was saying, "Hey dabba dee dabba dae SOLD!"

The crowd around him didn't need bid cards, and Dean could lean over to Jody from the bank to see if anyone's check would bounce. Anyone bidding simply nodded their head or raised a finger from crossed arms. On the fringe of the crowd was my dad, joking with Mark Hehnke, waving his pipe around as he gestured along with the story he was telling. I also recognized white-haired women from church looking

through the boxes in the middle of the street.

"Well, Charlotte. I just talked to your Grandma. She was looking for Harvey." Gladys LeDoyt. She, like everyone else in town, called my dad by his middle name, which he hated, but would never object to. "The choir sounded so pretty last Sunday." Though her severely sagging eyelids showed she was one of the oldest people in town, her bright hat (which she never went without) was always a contrast to her tired face.

I was the only one in the church choir younger than 50 and felt too guilty to quit. Virgil Eakins, a bass singer, was so proud to have a teenager sitting in the soprano section. "Thanks," I told Gladys. "There's my dad," I said loudly and pointed.

I began to peer into the dirty boxes around me. Most of the items were from "estates," people who had died since the last auction. Many of the white-haired ladies roaming around could look into a box and see a photo frame that had been on Lila's shelf just weeks before. Lila's children had moved to California and didn't need for "junk" to be shipped to them. Scraps of material, books, and garden seeds filled most of the boxes on Main Street.

"Look at these brass candlesticks!" My mom suddenly appeared behind me holding both candlesticks in her fists like hand weights. "I'm gonna go for 'em," she said, walking on without stopping.

I had never bought anything at the auctions. My parents usually ended up with a box full of anything ranging from

bookends shaped like Keith County to maps of Kansas from 1974. Grandma found a vase each year to take home, and even my closest friend Rachel had started her collection of antique purple dishes with a saucer and plate from the auction two years before.

Later in the afternoon I moved on to the furniture (the last items to be sold), stopping to sit on a double bed in the middle of the street. Dean was getting closer. His wife, Leah, was walking around the crowd with a clipboard. She kept reaching up to Dean with papers in her hand, and he would grab them and keep mumbling into the microphone without pausing, the crowd following diligently behind.

Right across the bed I was sitting on in the middle of the street was a dresser with an oval mirror attached to it. The drawer handles were ornate, and the wood dark and shiny, especially in the sun. It belonged to Fritz and Elsie, my Grandma's next door neighbors for fifty years. Fritz had died earlier in the year from a heart condition (rumor was he thought heart medicine was too expensive and quit buying it), and Elsie was sent to a nursing home.

I wanted that dresser.

I waved to my mom a few boxes away and pointed eagerly to it. Instead of coming to look, as I had hoped, she held up the brass candlesticks in victory.

"Oh, hello!" It was Grandma, who always acted surprised to run into me, even though I only lived two blocks away. She came and sat beside me on the bed. "I remember when

Elsie bought that dresser."

I looked into the mirror of the dresser at Grandma and me and could see Windy Gap and the water tower behind us.

I guess it was because of impracticality that I never bought the dresser--it would have never fit into my tiny dorm room at the University of Nebraska. My family had moved so many times that thinking of finding a place for the dresser made me weary that day. I didn't stay to see who bought it, but later Mom told me that Marge Perlinger had, who didn't know Fritz and Elsie as well as I did. She hadn't mowed Grandma's lawn hundreds of times, like I had, with Fritz watching intently, his arm leaning gently on the wire fence separating their yards. He'd wave to me as I made repetitive turns in her lawn, and I would think he wanted to tell me something. "Oh, I was just saying hello," he'd say, and we'd talk about the weather or neighbors. Though he had never been a smoker, his voice was quiet and strained. My dad had gone to school with his son. Our families had a history.

The December after that auction, on the 19th, Elsie died in the nursing home, two years to the day after Fritz. I had read her history in the Paxton Library years earlier, in junior high, though I don't think she ever knew this. At first I was drawn to it because she was one of the familiar names in the table of contents and had moved to Paxton in the sixth grade, just as I had. Later, I re-read her pages, struck by the parallels I found to my first months in Paxton:

she found out suddenly about moving; her mom "looked most unhappy" during the move; and for a long time, she didn't like Paxton (Windels 2).

That evening, while Grandma was fixing her snack (saltines on a saucer with hot tea and sugar poured over them), I mentioned all of the resemblances I found between Elsie and me.

"Charlotte, I told you that a long time ago." She was frustrated with me; it was the same tone she used when I couldn't remember a relative she had referred to so many times before.

It occurred to me then that maybe Grandma is not as certain as I am that her possessions will never end up on Main Street on a Saturday in March. I began to see how the auction may make her feel just a bit vulnerable thinking that her vases and dried flowers could one day be a box sold by Dean Schow for two bucks. We have never really told her otherwise.

When Grandma became ill last spring, my worries for her were italicized. I wanted to ask her about the day Grandad died, or about her auburn hair that sits in her cedar chest, or about the pictures in her scrapbooks with faded labels that no one can read but her, even though her eyesight is failing. I wanted to promise her that my family will keep everything she has ever saved, down to the last greeting card. I wanted her to know that if I had the chance today to buy Elsie's dresser, I'd do it.

Paxton Depot

I remember going to flatten pennies on the railroad tracks with my grandad, dad, and brother on Sunday afternoons, Grandad telling me that we'd only find the penny if I saw it fly through the air after the train hit it. I'd focus my eyes on the speck of copper I'd placed on the rail instead of the approaching train, staring so hard I was almost sure I saw the tracks tremble when I heard the train whistle. Sometimes we'd find the penny; sometimes we wouldn't. It didn't really matter. It was just good to be there with them, hearing about Grandad working in Pendleton, Oregon, automating a system to control traffic over hills, or to hear Dad talk about last month's issue of *Model Railroader* (he has every issue dating back to the 1950's) and its article on Union Pacific Challengers, Big Boys, and Micados. I didn't pay attention to what they were saying as much as I did to watching them say it, watching them stop when the next train came by, unable to speak because we were so close to the thundering on the tracks, unafraid but always awed.

When my father was a boy, Grandad worked on the railroad for the Signal Corps in Wyoming, where he maintained and directed the signals on new track. Later he worked in Sherman Hill, Wyoming, and wrote a rhyming poem about wiring

central traffic control: "In wonderful old Wyo./where plains to mountains swell/and the railroad like a ribbon/winds around each hill and dell" (George Hogg, 1). Though my grandfather never moved his family with him as he worked for Union Pacific, the railroad stayed in him and filtered into my father, who became a model railroader as a child. In Grandma's writings, it is clear his hobby was no small undertaking:

> When our son was eight, he was given a model train and some tracks. As he grew older so also grew the train project. There were mountains, waterfalls, a river, meadows complete with cows. . .towns, and a round house. Friends and neighbors as well as school children came to see the display. My job was to turn on the water for the falls and river. (4)

My family has a copy of the 1950s article about Dad that was published in the *North Platte Telegraph* and later picked up by the Associated Press. He is posed with his layout in front of a trellis and mountains. His slicked-back hair and partially closed eyes suggest indifference to the track behind him, but the effect is more likely the result of the photographer's poor timing.

When I was in grade school in Fargo, North Dakota, Dad took me to hobby shops filled with men like him. They stood comfortably near a layout, speaking rail-lingo. I learned quickly about the three most common scales: O scale, 1/4 proportions (meaning a fourth of an inch equals a foot); HO scale, 1/8; and N, 1/13. Countless times he showed me a sign he had designed and colored to display on the side of an HO

scale grocery store or bank. On weekends he would call me into the rec-room to show me the latest Great Northern engine. I would duck under the track that divided the doorway at chest level and look at the engine, more pleased that he wanted to share it than I was to see it. He crafted a miniature passenger car named *The Charlotte,* which I accidentally broke from steering too fast around the track in reverse. As I got older, he would ask me to give him my eye shadow colors before throwing them out so he could brush earthy taupes and browns on a hill or bluff for shading.

Even today, in Grandma's garage, Dad has seven slide carousels of railroad cars, engines and cabooses. I've seen all of them. Also sitting in Grandma's garage is Dad's complete model railroad system. When we left the Dakotas, he had no place to put the structure that had run the entire length of the basement in the Fargo house, though he had somehow had the foresight to build portable sections. Walking into the garage for the lawn mower or garden tools, I saw the dusty sections of scenery standing on their sides, the mountains, valleys, and tracks vertical to the ground. The trellises were taken out and packed away for safekeeping, as well as the dozens of cars and engines he had carefully painted. The work became more painstaking when he refused to buy bifocals, and his glasses dug into his cheeks when he tipped them up to paint the newest coal car.

The second month we lived in rural Nebraska, Dad took me

and my older brother Jim south of town, before it was too cold. School had started, and we hated it, hated the cowkids with their cream-colored hats and shiny belt buckles. We were bored. I wonder if Dad took us there to make us feel better or because the tracks called him over now that he was home again. He took us, that Saturday, to the siphon tower. I hadn't noticed the raised bump of green land that extended from the water tower to the cemetery, the length of the town (about a mile). Dad explained it: the water comes in the ditch on the north side of town at the water tower, where it is sucked *uphill* under Highway 30, Interstate 80, the UP main line, and then emptied into a ditch on the south side of the river at Cody Dam. The small cement tower was a lookout area for the underground siphon, and Dad climbed the rusty tower ladder with his camera to get some train pictures. He stepped easily on the precarious ladder, though it had probably been a decade since he'd last stepped on the rungs. Back then, before I knew I would one day like the tremor of a train, I didn't see why he needed yet another picture of a golden UP engine.

I should have known, could have made the connection if I had just thought a little bit about my parent's lives before me, where this love for the railroad comes from in my dad, and is growing in me. It is more than his father working for UP: it's the peeling, rotting depot that sits just south of the tracks; it's Bailey's Yard, the largest UP humpyard in the nation 35 miles away in North Platte; it's even the

memory he has from age four of going to the North Platte Depot with his mother. Women (and a few men) from the area would bring cakes and pies to serve with coffee to soldiers who stopped at the North Platte Canteen on their way home from World War II.

And without the railroad, it's unlikely Paxton would have existed at all. In the book *Union Pacific: The Building of the First Transcontinental Railroad,* Garry Hogg writes that when the Central and Union Pacific railroads were selecting the trail for building the first transcontinental railroad in the early 1860s, they ultimately followed President Lincoln's advice, "that the most practicable route for their railway was along the Platte Valley" (43). They chose the Oregon Trail, a route "along the twin valleys of the North and South Platte Rivers. . .in the vast state of Nebraska" (19). The Oregon Trail, the Pony Express, and now the Union Pacific railroad followed these rivers which envelop the area that later became Paxton.

Within a year the Union Pacific men had "surveyed, graded, and laid" track through the state of Nebraska (56). On June 20, 1867, Edward Searle became the first official resident of Paxton (then called Alkali for the hard water that "had to be treated by running it through a filter of excelsior, soda ash, and lime to eliminate foaming in the steam engine boilers" [Christensen 5]). As spikers were laying track on the UP between Ogallala and Julesburg, Colorado, eighteen year old Searle was hired as a telegraph

operator and later promoted to depot agent (Christensen 1). The depot, though it now sits perpendicular to the tracks rather than parallel, is the same building Searle worked in over 125 years ago.

Though it is definitive that the railroad created my town and a rightness in the way it has permeated my father and his history, I usually do not stop to think about it. My response to the railroad is more sensory, like hearing the constant roar of wheels throughout the day in Paxton, no matter if you are sitting in Swede's Cafe or north of town near the water tower. From our trips to flatten pennies, I remember touching the warm, vibrating track after the train passed. And I can recall how it felt when our century-old house shook slightly as trains came through. A golden engine with red letters is as much a part of western Nebraska landscape as are cattle and prairie grass.

And the railroad means a two hour chunk of the day driving and waiting with Dad to see a steam engine push by at 8:00 am on a Saturday. It means watching him shape papier-maché hills and color lakes. And now, living in Oregon, stopping my car behind candy-cane arms, I look for Willamette and Pacific engines or cabooses to memorize the black and white of their logo. They don't have those in Nebraska, so I want to remember each detail, because the railroad also means being able to talk to my father when sometimes I think we have nothing to say.

Sarben Bridge

There is something frank and joyous and young
in the face of the open country.

--Willa Cather

When my dad was elected Keith County Commissioner in 1984, I wasn't very excited--partly because my fourteenth birthday was on election day and partly because I wasn't sure what a Keith County commissioner was. What I remember most are his weekly meetings in Ogallala, 20 miles west of Paxton, and hearing him on the phone arguing with Deb Gilg, the county attorney. My usually conservative father suddenly became a man of the people, his arms gesticulating in a staccato rhythm, telling Ms. Gilg about the farmers out north who needed their roads graded.

I remember my dad's time in public office because it's how I became exposed to country roads in western Nebraska. On Saturdays he would go out to inspect the roads, and I often went with him. We would stop at Swede's Cafe where Leila would get our two coffees, then go to the shed at the edge of town where the county pickup was parked. Behind the wheel of the white Chevy, Dad's upper body suddenly resembled farmers and ranchers (I learned very early not to lump the two in one category), his shoulders relaxed and forward. In the summer, his elbow rested on the window so he could wave easily to everyone we met on the roads; when it was too cold

to roll the windows down, he simply raised his forefinger from the top of the steering wheel.

He explained his inspection: "There are over a thousand miles of county road to be graded in my section of Keith County alone--just over 500 actually--but the road grader goes over one side and then the other. Farmers call me complaining about the roads, and I have to decide if they are bad enough to be graded, because it's expensive." As we jostled on bumpy gravel that made the trees along the side of the road jump like film off its sprockets, I could envision the big machine with the protruding nose slowly combing and smoothing gravel along the rough surface.

We had lived in Paxton for two years, yet the country roads had never before interested me. I had known, of course, that many of my friends from school and church lived in the country, but had always pictured isolated farms here and there. Instead I found what seemed like a more spread out version of Paxton. We recognized nearly every pickup or car that we met, and intersections posted last names with directions to their homes, farms, and ranches: Holzfaster 2N, 3W. Each time we turned off onto an unfamiliar side road to check the washboard texture, I'd completely lose my sense of direction; then Dad made a turn and we were on the interstate access road or the dump road, and again I was surrounded by familiarity.

The dump road beginning at the edge of town offered the oldest associations, because we had helped Grandma and

Grandad haul trash to the crevice of land filled with mounds of ash and unburned garbage when we visited years before. The dump road starts as an uphill gravel path on the northeast edge of town that makes a seven mile loop in the country, like a squarish clover leaf, and eventually turns into Main Street back in Paxton. I had never thought of this path continuing or branching off and didn't yet know about the capillaries of roads surrounding the town until checking the gravel with my dad. In the county pickup, I took in the sandy hills of the dump road as he drove. One day, instead of curving left where the dump path led us back to town, Dad turned right and said he was heading to the Sarben Bridge. The new cement Sarben Bridge, built to replace the decayed wooden one, was finished. Apparently Keith County had applied for federal money for a new bridge years before; my dad was in office when it was finally rebuilt.

I had known kids at school from Sarben (an unincorporated town of about 50 people) like Jim Buss, a slick cowboy in the grade above mine. There were also dozens of farming and ranching families that were scattered along Sarben Road, a road I had not discovered until that day. We paused as we approached the tracks without crossing arms, and then we were in Sarben. Dad told me how it was named after Ak-Sar-Ben, an elite club for rich Nebraskans. Ak-Sar-Ben is Nebraska spelled backwards--what happened to the Ak in the town's name, he didn't know. As we passed the few trailer homes and two-story houses, he told me Sarben used to have a

post office and school. The lumberyard was the big business of the town until it burned down; soon only those with land stayed.

We approached the Sarben Bridge. It was not much to see: a two lane, cement bridge over the North Platte. The river bobbed a mucky brownish green underneath us, and just beyond the banks of the river was a wall of oak trees. Dad pulled over to get a better look at the new bridge, and I straddled the edge of its thick side without feeling scared of falling, though I'm usually skittish around water. I'm sure the ranchers and farmers that speed over the bridge everyday in their Chevy pickups don't even see it.

Dad and I crossed the bridge other times on those Saturday drives, but when I got my driver's license, I started to drive the country roads alone. From my car I saw grass turn from green to brown, then back to green again while the corn, wheat, and soybean crops grew. With my windows down, I smelled pungent alfalfa and listened to the crunch of gravel under my wheels. At first these drives brought solace; from minor teen dilemmas like a bad perm to grief over the death of my mom's father, I was drawn to the roads. Maybe it was the way the roads out north and south of town fit together. The miles and miles of country roads inevitably intertwined--taking a wrong turn at Danelle's house brought me to Highway 30 before I could panic about being lost. Almost always, though, I ended up at the Sarben Bridge. Unlike those that crossed it every day, I drove *to*

the bridge, not over it. It was my destination. If it was too cold outside to sit on the edge, I pulled over and just sat with it for a while, noticing the constancy of the dirty water, the same river that flowed under the old bridge years before any Hoggs lived in the area. Even snow seemed translucent when viewed from the bridge. "The so-called emptiness of the Plains is full of such miraculous 'little things,'" writes Kathleen Norris in *Dakota* (10). And when I first read those words, I nodded my head. She means natural landscape, but for me, this small, manmade bridge connecting Paxton to Sarben and the sandhills that reach north behind it somehow became miraculous.

I shared the bridge too. Rachel and I began driving out there on weekends when it seemed the small town was suffocating us. Our bodies responded with outstretched legs or a comfortable slouch as we approached Windy Gap and left town for the bridge. It is where we went when I decided I would go to school in Lincoln instead of Kearney State, where she had been for a year. When her grandma was in the hospital after a car accident, we went to the bridge to talk instead of sitting at Rachel's kitchen table. And we celebrated there. On the day I received my Regent's scholarship and knew I could pay for college, we drove there, got out of her Nova and danced across the white-gray surface of the bridge, the river keeping rhythm below. We did the same when she got into law school. Rachel and I shared the

bridge with our other friends, too, driving out on clear nights, at least six of us in the car, to sit on the edge of the bridge and look at the sky. The few lights from town were obscured by the dark line of trees, and we would sit for hours, drinking Old Milwaukee and playing the car radio.

Even now, in my mid-twenties, my friends and I spend our time visiting in a car rather than someone's living room. Usually we make the rounds around town noting how Tim Holzfaster has refurbished yet another house; then, inevitably, the driver says, "Should we head out north?" Over Labor Day weekend, while it's still warm in the evenings, we sit on the edge of the bridge or on the trunk of a car, bluish figures in the darkness. We don't comment on how bright the river becomes during a full moon, or how we are drawn to the lapping water. Going there is an automatic response, not an homage to some landmark.

In *All but the Waltz,* Mary Clearman Blew has a similar experience with her Judith River, the landmark her family has lived near for five generations; "To a stranger it surely must look insignificant, hardly worth calling a river" (9). I tried once to show the bridge to friends from Omaha but was not surprised when they stood there, not wanting to disappoint me with their reaction, but wondering how they could find something to praise about such a prosaic place. For a moment I felt vulnerable, as if I had just whipped the tarp off a painting I had painstakingly created. But then I realized how displaying the bridge to outsiders like a

significant landmark undermines the reflex I have to drive there whenever I am home.

The Sarben Bridge is just past Sarben, and if I don't veer left with the natural curve of the road, there are two options: the McFadden Ranch to the right or a narrow road continuing north that I have never seen anyone drive on. Also at this juncture are the cement remains of my friend Joel's house; the fire burned before I ever lived in Paxton. The Jays live in town now and don't mention the house, though Joel drank there with us one night as we parked in what used to be his living room.

My Grandma told me that Rosa Reitz, who goes to my church and is crippled by arthritis, used to leave school for the month of October to harvest sugar beets in Sarben back in the 1920s. It is hard for me to picture Rosa any other way than the image I have of her walking to church, holding her cane tightly, body clenched in pain. But while sitting on the bridge, I try to see what Rosa really must have looked like, her limber body bending down to pick beets, the ends of her long brown hair grazing the dirt.

This is what I think about if I am sitting at the bridge in July, when fireflies flash above the river like white Christmas lights. In the thousands of miles I have driven in only a twenty-mile radius outside of Paxton since those first trips with Dad ten years ago, the bridge is my resting place.

It is where I pause amid the people and country roads around Paxton that always, always conjoin.

III. SCALE

Lutheran Parsonage

It was a plain house--two-story, white, front porch. On the day we moved in, Swede and Irene, our landlords and owners of Swede's Cafe and Lounge, told us that it was the Lutheran parsonage when the town was settled nearly one hundred years ago. For the last few years, no one had lived there. The next day at school I looked in the *Paxton Through the Years* display. I recognized three buildings: the Lutheran church, the Catholic church, and my "new" house--a house very different from our split level on Evergreen Road in Fargo. My bedroom in the Fargo house had just been wallpapered with paper I had picked myself (it was not easy finding flowers to match the green shag). Now it would be some other girl's wallpaper, and she could walk down the street and make friends with Staci, too. And here I would be, practicing my flute in an old, ugly house in a town filled with farmers.

Mom and Dad tried to say positive things when we moved in: "Wow, two doors to the bathroom!"

Jim and I were not convinced: "The basement has a dirt floor. We think we saw a toad."

The kitchen had a black strip of tape around the wall at

eye level, a pantry, and a stove that opened with two doors. Through the back door Swede had added on a porch where the washer and dryer were kept, with only an unlocked screen door as security. And there was the dining room, where we put our stereo, desk, dining room table, and the out-of-tune piano Swede had somehow forgotten. Two years later, during one of our adventurous peeks into the basement, we realized the floor was being supported by a barrel with a stack of boards on top of it.

The rest of the house seemed more sensibly put together. The living room was next to another little room, with old-fashioned glass doors separating the two. Everything was connected, as if we could run in a circle around the downstairs and go into every room. Between the kitchen and the no-name room was the stairway to the upstairs. Fourteen steps. There were three bedrooms and a spare room where the hide-a-bed and part of Dad's model railroad were kept. A narrow, short hallway led from the spare bedroom to the two-doored bathroom, which also connected to my parents' bedroom.

This tiny hallway became my territory in high school. I would put in my contacts and do my makeup at the dresser Swede had somehow sandwiched in the inlet of the hallway. It was where Suzy, Rachel, and I would stand when I was running late for a night out. I would stare into the mirror above the dresser applying green eye liner while we decided if we should go to Ole's Big Game Lounge or just cruise town for a while.

This historic house, vacant for years before we moved in, became popular again. I was a town kid, and the house was right across the alley from Hehnke's Grocery Store, where we would go during lunch hour to buy string cheese and burritos to eat in my kitchen, too cool for the burgers in the cafeteria. During Homecoming Week, the boxes for the bonfire were stored in my garage, along with the "Welcome to a Tiger Luau" sign (which Scott painted wrong, so it read "Welcome Tiger to a Luau"). Nearly my whole class (all 16 of them) knew that I kept my spare key on a nail in the back porch closet. One night I came home from a basketball game when my parents were out of town, and Frank, Suzy, and Kevin were sitting on my couch watching Letterman. "We just came on in, Charlotte. We got bored driving around waiting for you."

During a street auction, Barb or Vance and his kids would ask to use our bathroom. When I got my senior pictures from the photographer, Regina, the checker at Hehnke's, took a break to look at them and drink a glass of iced tea. The house became not just the old Lutheran parsonage, but the Hogg's, even though Swede's wooden nameplate "The Nelson's" always hung above our front door. When Grandma would go to the grocery store, she would come in through the back porch with her half gallon of skim and visit for a while, setting the milk in our refrigerator to keep it cold. Usually she forgot the milk, and one of us would walk the block and a half to her house just minutes after she left.

During my freshman year of college, my parents moved two hours west to Sidney, leaving the house empty. When I went home for vacations, I would stubbornly meet them at Grandma's house, refusing to drive two more hours on I-80 to their new house--turquoise, and built in the late 1960's. That first winter break after moving away, I sneaked into the house with the key I still had on my keychain, walked up the fourteen steps in the dark, and sat by my bedroom window in a square of moonlight. I wanted more of a goodbye. It wasn't just a house, like the split level on Evergreen Road, or the screaming turquoise house in Sidney. It was a landmark in the town where my father and his parents had graduated from high school. Grandad had walked by this house on his way to school every morning. When Grandma was the Grand Marshal in the Labor Day Parade in 1973, the convertible she was waving from had gone right by my front door.

I thought of my best friend Rachel crying when we left the house; "I can't imagine not being able to walk in and grab a couple of Oreos after school." I knew I would never again live in a house where it didn't matter if everyone knew where I kept my key. My cat Tigger was buried in the backyard with two bricks forming a **"T"** on top of the dirt, and Regina said she would visit his grave for me. Jacob Vasquez from next door came over while we were loading boxes and asked if he could still use the basketball hoop when we were gone. As I walked back down the fourteen steps for the last time, I

realized that this house, while I hadn't been paying attention, had become the hardest house to leave.

The ironic thing is, my parents never owned this house. For seven years, my mom wrote Swede and Irene a check for $300 a month. Sometimes I would go next door with her to drop off the rent check, which often turned into an hour-long excursion. This house was the emblem of our "temporary" stay in Paxton. It took us two months to even move into the house--my parents were so sure our stay in town would be short that Jim and I lived at Grandma's and they lived two doors down at Aunt Yvonne's.

So for the first months we were in Paxton, I kept my distance, even though my dad seemed more animated in this place where every street reminded him of a story. We found, of course, that keeping our distance was impossible--everyone knew who we were before we even lived there.
Within a year, Dad was on the church council and Mom in the Ruth Circle. Jim, who had been a nameless freshman in Fargo, was now involved in choir, band, basketball, track, and Honor Society, and I was not far behind in seventh grade as a cheerleader, choir member, and volleyball and basketball player. Like many nuclear families that have relocated away from their relatives, my family was isolated in the bigger cities we lived in; Thanksgiving found only the four of us clinking glasses until we came to Paxton. In a town so small, the lines between family and community often blurred,

and though we as a town may have been isolated, individually we never were.

Of course, our school did not have classes like journalism or activities like a debate team or a French club. The only language available was Spanish, and that was not until 1982. And the town could be as stifling as high humidity. For six years I sat in classes with the same sixteen people; I knew Mike's wardrobe as well as my own. Ball games and dances brought other teenagers from Eustis, Venango, or Thedford, but those new faces eventually became as tiresome as the ones we saw in algebra every day--by the time we had our district speech contest, I could recite Tim's speech, and he lived in Brule.

The expectations we had of each other could be just as smothering. When Shaylene's mom opened a hair salon adjacent to my house, I was informed many times by my classmates that my friend Amy and I were the only high schoolers not getting haircuts at The Mane Design. Cody told me it hadn't gone unnoticed that I was driving 35 miles to get my hair cut rather than walking across my backyard.

But getting my hair cut there meant more than convenient locale; The Mane Design became the nucleus of gossip in a town that already thrived on spreading news. I knew that by letting Deb's hands near my head, I was also giving her permission to ask me about school, my boyfriend, my dad's job, and my GPA. There was an unspoken expectation to disclose--not just about my own life but any fresh news I'd

been privileged to hear firsthand--that people feel is somehow earned by our proximity and isolation.

And still, I am uneasy when reading Kathleen Norris's thoughts on the isolationism of communities as small as ours. In her essay "Gatsby on the Plains," she writes about the problems small towns can cause for themselves when they resist change. She describes how their "frame of reference" diminishes when they "drop subscriptions to national magazines and newspapers," and with this smaller frame of reference comes smaller aspirations (50-1). Small-town insularity *can* be damaging, as her essay accurately reflects, so I couldn't understand why I was bothered by the piece. It's true there are less opportunities and more isolation in small towns, but I did not find isolation *only* suffocating.

By speaking generally of her town as representative of all small towns, she perpetuates stereotypes of close-minded hicks. Most people who've never lived in a small town know of the stereotypes. Fewer know that in some ways, a small town is also a world, and this is why I resist Norris's essay. If I hadn't lived in Paxton, I doubt very much I would have spent so many hours of my teenage years talking with the elderly at the grocery store, bank, and even at church. My brother, who looks for Ralph Lauren labels, had a girlfriend who lived on a farm and drove a 1965 Nova to school every day. Neither of us would have played sports in a larger school. Maybe I was one of the lucky ones, but I am certain that living in Paxton opened my mind instead of

closing it.

Going home this winter only confirmed my belief. I watched two old friends talking over beer--one is a lawyer, the other a truck driver. In a larger city these two perhaps would never have spoken to one another. My classmates were not farmers or rednecks, but Scott and Kevin, people whom I sat next to and ate lunch with every day for six years. Though we tired of each other's faces and clothes and opinions, though I still don't agree with their views (and I'm sure they don't agree with mine), our "isolation" made it somehow beside the point. That's not to say we still don't argue about Senator Bob Kerrey or abortion rights when we run into each other at Ole's. But a level of respect, given to us by our proximity, won't let us simplify each other until someone becomes a label. It is impossible for me to categorize John as merely a right-winger who uses words like "chick" and "fag." John is also the boy who in sixth grade taught me what a road grader was and continually played George Strait's "All My Ex's Live in Texas" until I acknowledged the flair of country music.

Rachel called me one morning a couple of years ago to tell me her mother wanted me to know that the Davisons had bought our old house. Whenever I go to Paxton to visit Grandma now, I take a more careful walk by my house. Since the Davisons bought it, there are always changes. They put an

ornate window in the front door where plain glass used to be. They re-roofed the house, too, and I heard they knocked out the pantry wall and got rid of Swede's old piano I had taught myself Christmas carols on. Aside from putting a few nail holes in the wall, my family never made any changes; we were renters. It would seem that walking by the changing exterior and knowing we never owned the old Lutheran parsonage would diminish the associations I have, but I still call it my house.

Great Peace March

In June 1986, the summer I was fifteen, we learned that the Great Peace March would be walking through our town and staying overnight. There were over 500 marchers, which meant our town would double in size for a night. This was also the summer my sixties obsession peaked. My vision was of myself in a gauzy top holding a candle and purposefully singing "Pass it On" with faceless marchers. Anticipation for the marchers swelled, their arrival the only discussion in town. At the swimming pool, Michelle and Jamie worried that the marchers would swarm the pool showers, their dirt-covered hands reaching over the counter for crisp towels. At Kildare's Lumber, I heard Norm say he heard some actress from *Hill Street Blues* would be walking with the marchers.

In Hehnke's, I heard Ruth at the checkout stand saying that marchers were caught stealing in Ogallala. I rolled my eyes to myself. Hadn't anyone else in town seen *The Day After* on TV? Didn't they believe in nuclear disarmament? Weren't they scared of a nuclear holocaust? Back at the meat counter, they were debating on whether or not to close while the marchers were in town, but were more enticed by how much they could profit from them. "We'll just have to keep an eye on the S.O.B.'s," Barb said, cleaving a slab of beef. I'm not sure if the whole idea of the arms race was just too

distant from their world or if I witnessed what Carol Bly refers to as "the nonfeeling syndrome," used to describe her Minnesota small town's emotional repression of national events.

They arrived on a Saturday afternoon, and the town didn't know what to do with itself. Gayle Ann said she was going to stay inside with doors locked. Some were just going to drive to North Platte for the day and avoid the whole thing. And a few, like me, were waiting for them, tentative from how many there were but unable to resist. I walked up to the school where the marchers were setting up camp. The gravel parking lot, usually filled with familiar pickups, was instead covered with small, colored, dome-like tents, as if giant ladybugs had taken over. There were trailers everywhere: first aid, food, mail, even a barbershop. A skinny, barefoot man with uncombed hair approached me and handed me a pamphlet; "Welcome to Peace City. Would you like a tour?"

His name was John, and as he showed me the food trailer, he gave me the spiel; there were marchers from 47 states ranging in age from birth to 79. Men and women had quit their cushy jobs as lawyers and computer programmers to protest nuclear arms. Though I stood in my own school parking lot, it felt more like a city street as I passed unrecognizable faces. He showed me the typical menu: turkey soup, mashed potatoes, and barley. Hair was washed at the spigots of the water truck. If farmers I saw at the Post

Office had a stench like the marchers, I would have been appalled, but on them it seemed exotic. The cost of the march was $25,000 a week, according to my Peace City tour guide, who handed me pamphlet after pamphlet (on recycled paper) and told me how I could donate to the cause.

Though I had initially told myself it was their grass roots movement that had sparked my interest in the march, I found myself much more struck that day by the notion of this portable town plunked down in the middle of my own and the individuals that could live this way than I was by their philosophies. By evening I had befriended Dave from Yakima and Abe from Encino and bought them ice cream cones at the Tiger's Den. Abe was fourteen, Dave in his twenties. They told me how the world's nuclear arsenal can be compared to a freight train 3.6 million miles long, each car completely filled with TNT. I learned that they saw their effort as the most tangible way to educate people they could otherwise not reach (such as small towns in Nebraska). They were passionate spokespersons for their cause, willing to disrupt their lives to tell people that the world has the capability to destroy 18,000 times greater than all of the Allied firepower in World War II. The awareness they raised about nuclear arms was pertinent, frightening, and changed the way I watched and read the media.

I asked questions about the arms race, but found myself also wondering how Abe's parents agreed to let him march from California to D.C. and what Dave thought when he noticed

there were no other black people in Paxton. These marchers had become almost mythical in the weeks before their arrival. Having normal conversations in my normal town with people who had faces, smells, and ideas distinct from what I had always known in Paxton complicated not only the way I saw the marchers, but the way I viewed people I had known for years. What surfaced were contradictions: in the way I saw the marchers, in how I saw my community, and in how I saw them react to the contradictory in each other. Their visit made me aware of much more than the statistics of nuclear disarmament.

At dusk, marchers walked fifteen minutes across town to the park for the planting of the Peace Tree, a ceremony enacted in every town they stayed in. The mayor of Peace City, a tan, short-haired woman with purple sandals, shook hands with the Paxton mayor, Stan Rochlitz (who was also my math teacher), an overweight man who acted as if he'd invented sarcasm. Mr. Rochlitz reluctantly took the key to Peace City and gave a workglove in return.

That fall in algebra, Mr. Rochlitz told my class that some freaky peace marcher sent him postcards every two weeks, that he only grabbed the workglove for them at the last second on his way to the park, and that he mowed over the Peace Tree a week after the marchers left.

In *Letters from the Country,* Carol Bly is appalled by the ease with which small-town Minnesotans forgave President

Nixon after Watergate; "On the surface, such a response to national events is pathetic. Under the surface it is dangerous" (23). After that June day in 1986, I do and don't agree with her--I was ashamed of people who were hostile that day. And I was frustrated: Don, who locked his door against the Peace Marchers, is the same man who spent 45 minutes digging my car out of the snow after a blizzard. I was also reminded of how I'd felt similarly--ashamed, frustrated--within our community boundaries. My friend Julie was once stopped by a shout across the street from her friend's father. "Did you hear my daughter's getting married?" he shouted over the busiest intersection. Then, "She got knocked up." Later, when this new mother apparently gained a significant amount of weight, her family told my classmates, until everyone began speculating on when she would come home so they could catch a glimpse of her. Though this is horrid treatment by any standards, it is harder to watch in a small town, where our intimate proximity should intensify respect, not diminish it.

But the reason I only partly disagree with Bly is that focusing on closed minds of a town seems to me a simplistic categorization of small town residents, a categorization that to the observer and avid reader is also the most commonly accentuated facet of their lives. That's why I point out that if I hadn't observed the march as a Paxton resident, if I had lived in a city, I probably would have learned of the arrival of the Great Peace March from a small news blurb. I

would have listened with interest, perhaps would have even gone to their site, but would not have absorbed the experience as fully as I did in my town, where the event consumed not just the day but the entire month, and still affects me today. I also would not have known just how much it took someone like Vicki, my conservative neighbor, who lives only blocks away from her birthplace, to invite a few marchers in for supper. Seeing my town encounter the march firsthand raised these contradictions I felt toward the people in my town.

I have often felt similar opposition not just about being from a small town but in being a Nebraskan, proud of my sense of place that so few can claim, yet acutely aware, and sometimes even embarrassed by, the stigmas surrounding this place. I remember how I perceived myself with Dave and Abe, both cosmopolitan (for holding their interest) and hick at the same time. I felt the contrary the summer I went to Florida to visit my cousins when a neighbor asked me if we had one-way streets in Nebraska. I felt it in Oregon when a classmate was surprised to learn not only that I have gay friends, but that gay people even live in Nebraska. Always there is an impulse to defend myself, but at the same time a protective feeling, like knowing a sweet secret.

I still wonder why the Great Peace March was so affecting to me, why I remember names of men I met ten years ago and only spoke to for a few hours. I thought of them

when the Cold War ended, when I read "Sootfall and Fallout" by E.B. White, and I still think of them when I see footage of missiles on the news. They achieved their goal then, to raise awareness and education; yet that was the least of what they did for me by coming to my town.

That day in June, as they folded tents and washed feet, preparing to walk along Highway 30 to Sutherland, Abe told me I could walk along with him to the next stop; he said I was "about the only cool Nebraskan" he met. And I realized these weren't even towns to him, merely stops, and that he saw people in my town in the same one-dimensional way they saw him. Perhaps that was part of my fascination with the marchers--to them, Paxton was only "flat farmland and [one of the] western-looking towns" (*Peace City Newsletter,* 1). My hometown was the same to them as Hershey, Big Springs, Darr, or Maxwell, a place to sleep after walking through a day of wavy heat.

In the end I didn't walk with them, and I'm still not sure of the reason. Maybe I stayed home because I was a little scared, at fifteen, to walk with them by myself, which made me more like my neighbors than I wanted to admit. But even now I can see them on the familiar twelve-mile stretch of road. In my mind it is more dramatic than reality would have been, more like an exodus than a walk; the sandhills, wildflowers, and UP engines reconstruct the flatness for them so they see the layers of the Plains, just as I have learned to.

Grandma's Backyard

The weight of a petal has changed
the world and made it ours.

--Loren Eiseley

In 1973, my grandma ran for Keith County Pioneer Centennial Queen. She sent me a copy of the program when I was two years old, signed, "All my love, Grandma Hogg." Of all the candidates, her biography is the longest, and she has marked corrections where editors apparently tampered with the words she wrote. It gives the usual bio that I have been told: she was one of three red-haired girls born to Mary Lillie Lake and Ed Osborn, granddaughter to Corporal Jessee Osborn and his wife Matilda, and married to George Paxton Hogg in 1927. In a long paragraph, she recalls childhood details separated by dozens of semi-colons, her favorite activity listed last: "growing her first flower garden when she was 10 years old" (D. Hogg 7). I know from her memoirs that she's referring to 1919 when her grandma, Evaline Lake, brought her rose moss seed which thrives in sunshine and produces showy flowers in yellow, red, and purple .

Her clearest memories of Evaline Lake are like mine of her: "Mostly I remember her backyard with the flowers and vegetables" (D. Hogg 17-18). Moonflowers, fragrant night-blooming white flowers, were the first I remember Grandma

naming as we sat in orange metal chairs near her garden. The bright colors that filled her backyard like a gigantic bouquet reminded me of the clothes she wore, slacks and blouses in pinks, purples, and reds.

After living near Grandma for a few years, I tried to love her hobby as she did, entering the Labor Day Garden Show. As founding member of the Paxton Garden Club in 1951, she had chaired the first garden show that became an annual event. By the time I lived there, she was the oldest member of the club. Grandma spent every Labor Day down at the Paxton Community Center. In the morning she spread white plastic tablecloths, organized the different categories, and helped people register their horticulture or arrangement. Even before any other Garden Club members arrived, Grandma carefully displayed her individual flowers on the appropriate tables, the delphiniums, cheerleader mums, irises, morning glories, and tulips erect in their vases.

As the morning went on, the tables became filled as the Perlingers or Sedlaceks removed vases of flowers from boxes. The first row was for large horticulture: pumpkins, squash, and watermelons. Grandma was constantly getting asked questions as people arrived: "Dorlis, where do these go? Dorlis, who has the ribbons? Did you make these cookies?"

When I came to the show, I passed by the large horticulture exhibit (unless I noticed a gargantuan pumpkin) as well as the tables with tomatoes, corn, and cucumbers, stopped briefly to look at Grandma's single flower entries,

and went to the floral arrangements. She had an entry in nearly every category and was almost always the sweepstakes winner. That year the theme was *God Bless America.*

I entered the contest that year with a miniature arrangement (6" or shorter) in the *Little Liberty* category. It was the first year I submitted an entry. The year before, my cousin Cherame and Aunt Mary had visited and entered with Grandma. The night before the show, they had stood around Grandma's kitchen table, cutting stems and putting green floral clay in bottoms of vases. My Grandma's giggling--the whole kitchen in fact--was as colorful as the flowers on the table. I sat on the stool hearing their stories, included in the conversation, but acutely aware that I had no scissors or flowers in my hand. That was the moment I decided to participate the following year.

That day, my arrangement in the *Little Liberty* category received first out of four entries. It was the only arrangement category that Grandma didn't enter. As Judy gave me the ribbon, my grandma looked satisfied, as though it was a given that I would win, that I would have this talent.

The truth was, I didn't like making flower arrangements.

Grandma, though she waited until I asked for help, had found the opaque purple vase for me to use and had shown me that Queen Anne's Lace was just right for the delicate arrangement. As she effortlessly slid her morning glories into a cowboy boot, I shoved my flowers into the petite vase, feeling clumsy. It was the same feeling I had kneading dough

for her when she wanted me to make cinnamon rolls from scratch, knowing that if I practiced enough I could get it right, but not really caring enough to do so. Baking and gardening were not my strengths. They were hers.

Last winter Grandma asked me to help organize the many clippings and papers in her drawers. Among photos of her holding sweepstakes ribbons, I found the write-up her peers made when she was honored as Gardener of the Year. It tells of her giving flowers not just to her own church but the Lutheran and Catholic churches, too. She began a community beautification project, gave corsage-making demonstrations for extension clubs, and donated her own flowers to other garden club members. It was the fourth time she had received the award from her peers.

I began to wonder why I never had the desire to grow things, the same desire she found through her grandma when she was ten years old. Grandma seemed to have passed it on to others: Grandad began experimenting with hybrid flowers (once creating a new iris he named for me), and her daughter creates ornate floral designs in Brazilian embroidery. It's as if those closest to Grandma can't help but see lilies and daffodils when they close their eyes--except for me. Instead I see Grandma, bending over weeds in her backyard, stopping to reapply her 30 SPF sunscreen or drink a glass of water from her beige cup. Rather than reach into the soil myself, I am content to appreciate her craft, to watch her talk to

toads as they lunge from her. If I try to absorb her talent, make it mine by buying seeds for the front lawn of the house I'm renting, it will feel like buying a fake Christmas tree instead of a real one.

I think about this now because Grandma is sick and won't be searching through seed catalogues this winter; she cannot work in her garden anymore, maybe never will again. She guided her walker (one of those high-tech triangular ones) to the back window when I visited last summer and said, "It's unmanageable." Then, without judgment, "You probably can't tell which are the weeds and which are the flowers, can you? You're lucky."

And I thought of her going to bed at night, so aware of the tangled overgrowth beyond her walls, wanting to thin it out and feel dirt, worms, and weeds. I walked outside and sat on the back step. She was right, of course; I couldn't tell. It still looked beautiful to me.

Epilogue

At a party last summer, someone asked me if I would ever move back to Paxton. Without hesitation, I answered no. Later that evening I wondered if my response was hypocritical, since I had written pages and pages mostly concentrating on what I value about this place. Two things made me certain I was not being untrue to the words I had written: Scott Russell Sanders's essay "Settling Down" and my old neighbor Virgil Eakins.

In his piece on staying put, Sanders writes:

> How can you value other places if you do not have one of your own? If you are not your-self placed, then you wander the world like a sightseer, a collector of sensations, with no gauge for measuring what you see. Local knowledge is the grounding for global knowledge. (332)

I don't have to live in Paxton to have its sense of community; I carry my place with me like a worry stone in a pocket. After reading Sanders and writing this collection, I finally understand that even though I may never get to literally stay put the way Grandma has, I am still grounded in place.

Last Labor Day weekend while in Paxton, I sat by Virgil at the pancake breakfast following the five kilometer walk/run. He lived across the street from me when I lived in

the old parsonage. I sang with him in the Lutheran church choir. His voice shook a bit too much on Sunday mornings as we stood around the piano, and sometimes I had to help him find the right robe. His wife, Virginia, has been ill with Alzheimer's disease; I have not seen her in years, but remember her dyed-black hair. I somehow always run into Virgil when I'm in Paxton, even though I was told he spends most of his time indoors with her and hardly goes out.

That morning at the pancake feed, I realized I had not met Virgil through my grandmother or my parents, but on my own, while trying to find a choir robe in the church closet. Though I could not see Paxton, or see *me* in Paxton, without feeling my heritage on every street corner or country road, I realized that I did not just become part of the landscape, I *made* part of it. I am not only the legacy of Dad, Grandma, Ed Osborn, and Jessee and Matilda, but someone who has left remnants of myself.

After I finished my pancakes, I offered to get Virgil more orange drink so he wouldn't have to get up. He called me "darlin'" like he always has, as though I am his granddaughter and not just a neighbor from years ago. And sometimes I feel like his granddaughter when I go out of my way to drive by his house when I leave town, because I start to cry when I think of his darkening age spots and his limp that always looks worse each time I'm home.

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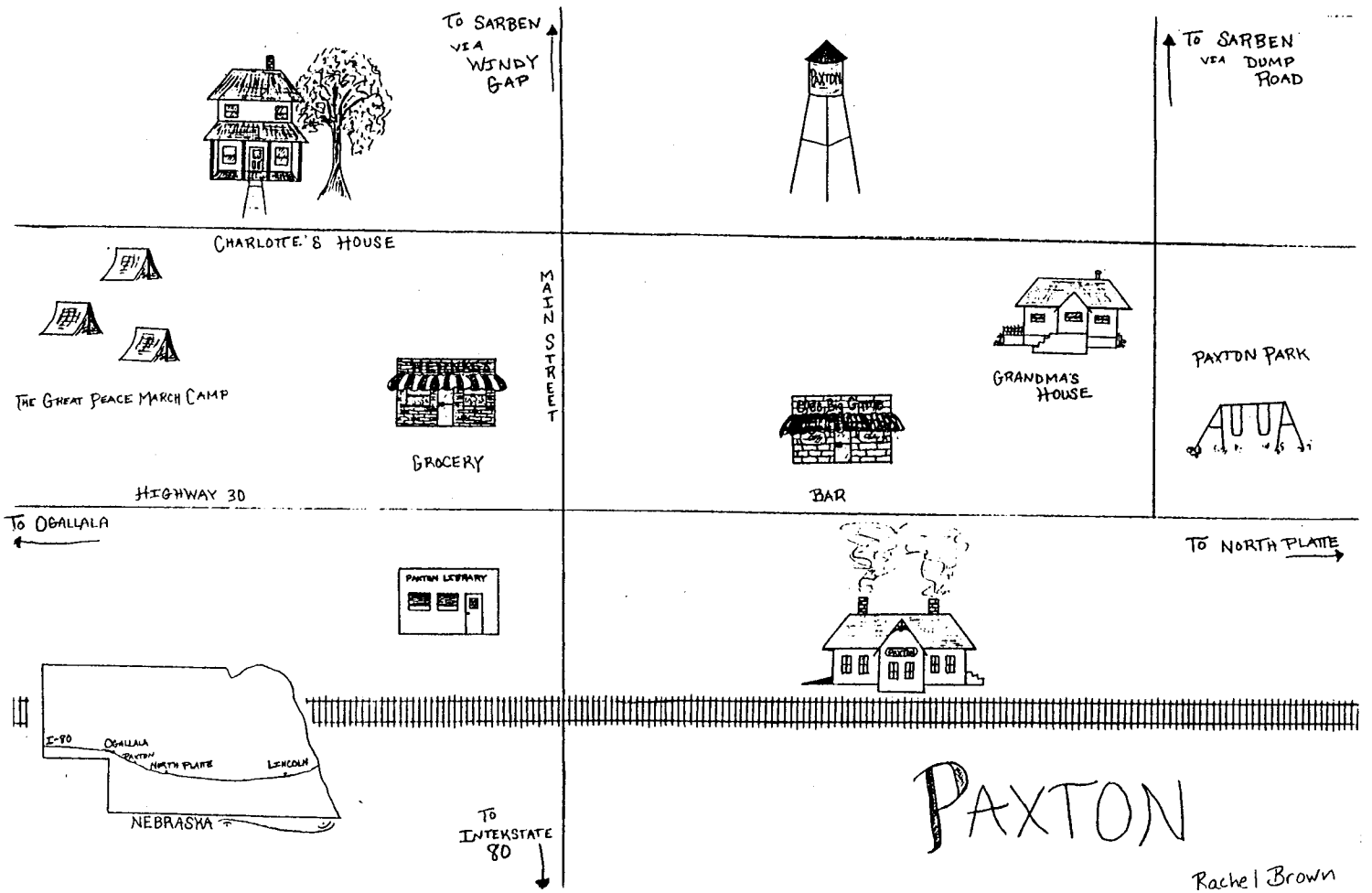
APPENDIX


To SARBEN via WINDY GAP
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CHARLOTTE'S HOUSE
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MAIN STREET
THE GREAT PEACE MARCH CAMP
GROCERY
GRANDMA'S HOUSE
PAXTON PARK
HIGHWAY 30
BAR
To OGALLALA
To NORTH PLATTE
PAXTON LIBRARY
I-80
OGALLALA
PAXTON
NORTH PLATTE
LINCOLN
NEBRASKA
To INTERSTATE 80
PAXTON
Rachel Brown